The Myth of Secular Neutrality: Unbiased Bioethics?

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The media spotlight on the Terri Schiavo case brought the world’s attention to important matters such as the use of advance directives and appropriate legal advocacy for the defenseless. It also made it apparent that the myth of neutrality is not regarded as a myth at all. The myth of neutrality is the idea that a secular point of view is free from philosophical or religious influence and, therefore, objective. In the Terri Schiavo situation, some sought to discredit certain views by considering not the content of any argument put forth, but rather by attacking people on the basis of their worldview commitments.

Herein lies the problem: neutrality is impossible. Secularists have no claim to neutrality because everyone has a set of presuppositions that guide their moral and ethical analyses. Contending for any position depends upon this framework in that it is through one’s presuppositions that facts are interpreted and related. No one lives or operates in a vacuum where the mind is a ?blank slate? and facts are uninterpreted. Were that the case, ?brute facts? would exist independently of God and have no logical relation to one another. Accordingly, man could not know them.

There is no neutral ground from which to discuss questions regarding what it means to be human. Such questions ?are inevitably normative, value-laden, metaphysical in character.? Yet there are entities that purport the notion that neutrality is possible. Take for example the Human Embryo Research Panel established by the National Institutes of Health in the mid 1990’s. In a statement where they discuss their deliberations on the federal funding of research on human embryos, they declare, the ?Panel weighed arguments for and against Federal funding of this research in light of the best available information and scientific knowledge and conducted its deliberations in terms that were independent of a particular religious or philosophical perspective.? Meilaender brings clarity to the table when he asserts, ?We are not philosopher-kings who can adjudicate disputes between conflicting views without ourselves being parties to
the argument.\footnote{4} We simply cannot enter into bioethical discourse and leave our presuppositional framework at the door. Any attempt to do so is merely an attempt to disguise one’s own worldview and is, at best, naïve. The answer to the question of whether bioethics can be unbiased is simple: all bioethics are biased.

The Terri Schiavo case in Florida earlier this year illustrates well the erroneous assumption that anyone can be truly neutral. This was made quite evident when several people quoted by the media attempted to discredit individuals by mocking them because of their public Christian worldview.

On March 23, 2005, Dr. William P. Cheshire, M.D., filed an affidavit in Duval County, Florida, which stated that, on the basis of his review of the extensive medical records documenting Terri’s care over the years, his personal observations of Terri, and his observations of Terri’s responses on many hours of video tape, Dr. Cheshire believed Terri demonstrated a number of behaviors that cast a reasonable doubt on the prior diagnosis of PVS. Dr. Cheshire then proceeded to provide several pages of elaboration on these behaviors and concluded that Terri was likely in a minimally conscious state rather than a persistent vegetative state. He concluded the affidavit with the statement: Where serious doubts exist as to whether a cognitively impaired person is or is not consciously aware, even if these doubts cannot be conclusively resolved, it is better to err on the side of protecting vulnerable life.\footnote{5}

While it’s true that a worldview is going to in some way inform a person’s conclusions, this does not necessitate that those conclusions are in error by virtue of the fact that the person holding them is a Christian as non-Christians often assert. Another neurologist easily could have come to the same conclusions as Dr. Cheshire in that one need not be a Christian to have compassion and concern for the most vulnerable in our society. However, one needs the Christian perspective in order to account properly for why the vulnerable, like Terri Schiavo, should be treated with human dignity.

Immediately after Dr. Cheshire’s affidavit was made public, there was a media frenzy to discredit him, not only him, but anyone who approached the Terri Schiavo case and also happened to be a Christian. The assumption was that if you were a Christian, and perhaps more narrowly, a pro-life evangelical or Roman Catholic, you simply could not be objective about the case. The presupposition behind such a view is that pure objectivity and the ability to be neutral is even possible. It is as if those seeking to discredit Dr. Cheshire do not have a worldview of their own.

The Baptist Press News (BP News) reported that while papers like the Washington Post were reporting Cheshire’s affiliation with CBHD, these papers were not reporting the affiliations of other so-called experts being quoted by the media. While the piece in the BP News sought to draw our attention to media bias, it also made clear some of the guiding presuppositions of the players in the ethical discussion. Citing a National Review article, BP News reported that Dr. Ronald Cranford of University of Minnesota Medical School, a witness for Michael Schiavo, is one of the most outspoken advocates of the right to die movement and of physician assisted suicide in the U.S. today. The writer of this piece is also quoted as saying that Cranford has described PVS patients as indistinguishable from other forms of animal life. He has said that PVS patients and others with brain impairment lack personhood and should have no constitutional rights. The BP News piece concluded with the information that Cranford is on the board of
directors for Choice in Dying, formerly known as the Euthanasia Society of America. How then can we consider Cranford unbiased?6

The Terri Schiavo case is an excellent example of how secularists are convinced that neutrality and pure objectivity are possible. It is believed that, through reason alone, there exists the possibility to arrive at a consensus on moral dilemmas. H. Tristram Engelhardt, philosopher and ethicist at Baylor, believes otherwise.

Engelhardt, author of The Foundations of Bioethics and The Foundations of Christian Bioethics, believes that the pluralistic public square is made up of what he terms ?moral strangers,? with an ?irresolvable plurality of moral understandings? and that ?each side presupposes different fundamental moral premises as well as rules of evidence and inference.?7 Based on these premises, no agreement will ever be found among these varying views. Engelhardt says, because of the inadequacies of human reason to arrive at a content-full morality in the secular context, it is impossible for moral strangers to arrive at a content-full agreement through rational discourse. While I believe his diagnosis is accurate, I disagree with his prescription.

Engelhardt holds that differing moral communities can ?act with common moral authority and live peaceably within a larger secular society, as long as they draw common authority from agreement.?8 Further, Engelhardt maintains that, what he terms libertarian cosmopolitanism ?provides the philosophical foundation for a procedure, for a general secular structure for the morally authoritative collaboration of moral strangers. It constitutes the moral point of view of moral strangers.?9

This collaboration is what he calls common consent. In order for common consent to transpire, individuals must grant permission to other individuals. Permission giving presupposes an authoritative position of the permission giver. Engelhardt posits in The Foundations of Bioethics, ?The principle of permission, which is justified in terms of the morality of mutual respect, does not focus on freedom as a value, but on persons as the source of general secular moral authority.?10

What secularism regards as a resolvable through the use of reason, Engelhardt sees as irresolvable except through consent. Still, another option exists. An option that recognizes that the public square need not be accepted nor engaged on secular terms.

For Christians in the public square, I advocate a form of argumentation that is unambiguously Christian and committed to the authority of Scripture. The role Scripture can play is not necessarily to provide explicit content to an argument, but to be its foundation. This form will critique secular presuppositions in light of the Christian worldview, showing the insufficiency of secularism. As Bahnsen states, ?He [the secularist] needs to be answered according to his folly?demonstrating where his philosophical principles lead??lest he be wise in his own eyes? (Prov. 26:5).?11
In the public square, Christians are involved in a number of areas such as the legislative process, the sharing of opinions, and generally informing society. We enter into these discussions in order to work for the common good. By joining our arguments with a presuppositional critique of other arguments and worldviews, we are demonstrating intellectual honesty and demanding the same from our ?moral strangers,? including those who most often try to convince us of the possibility of neutrality.

Some might suggest that apologetics has nothing to do with what goes on in the public square. If understood as only the defense of the Christian faith, I can understand how one could arrive at that conclusion. But Cornelius Van Til, the 20th Century theologian who popularized the method of presuppositional apologetics, defines apologetics as ?the vindication of the Christian philosophy of life against the various forms of the non-Christian philosophy of life.?\(^\text{12}\) John Frame, theologian and student of Van Til, defines presuppositional apologetics as ?the application of Scripture to unbelief.?\(^\text{13}\) Similar to Van Til, Frame describes presuppositional apologetics as defensive and offensive,\(^\text{14}\) asserting, ?God calls his people, not only to answer the objections of unbelievers, but also to go on the attack against falsehood.?\(^\text{15}\) Here he quotes the apostle Paul who says, ?We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.?\(^\text{16}\) It is, therefore, helpful to think of one of the functions of apologetics as seeking to expose the foolishness of non-Christian thinking.\(^\text{17}\)

In leaving the door open for an offensive form of apologetics, one that seeks to take every thought captive, suddenly the public square does not seem to be an inappropriate location for the discipline to be put into practice. I suggest that in adopting this approach we finally can engage the public square in a more intellectually honest manner, and ultimately with the gospel. As we pursue truth in bioethics, we need to pursue and confront falsehood like that of those who, during the Schiavo case, portrayed themselves as having no bias when in fact just the opposite is the case. As Christian bioethics contends for the dignity of human life, it must demand intellectual honesty from all involved.

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3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.


8 Ibid., 135.

9 Ibid., 43.


11 Bahnsen, 6.


15 Ibid.

16 2 Cor. 10:5 (NASB).


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